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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE
24 DECEMBER 1952

PRE-ELECTION MANEUVERS IN ITALY

logged 3 Feb.

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The Christian Democratic government in Italy is expected to retain parliamentary control after next spring's national elections, largely by revising the electoral system. Its indicated popular majority, however, is precariously slim and could be wiped out by a comparatively few defections from a center bloc already disturbed by the government's rightist tendencies.

The local elections ending last June showed a near-stalemate in the parties' popular strength, with the center bloc polling 51 percent of the vote, the Communists, Nenni Socialists and their allies about 35 percent, and the Monarchist-Fascist group about 12 percent. During the elections the Communists and the neo-Fascists showed their willingness to combine temporarily against the center by running joint lists in certain districts. After the elections there were reported attempts by both the Nenni Socialists and the Monarchists for rapprochement with the Christian Democrats, but these resulted in no realignments.

De Gasperi has therefore presented a bill to provide a 65 percent parliamentary majority for the bloc winning a bare popular majority in the election, with the present system of proportional representation to continue if no bloc attains a majority. The Christian Democrats are now utilizing political patronage in an attempt to ensure this thin popular majority.

The three minor democratic parties, which polled about 13 percent of the vote in the local elections, have agreed to the bill and to participation in the government's electoral bloc only because of their apprehensions of a Communist victory or achievement by the neo-Fascists of a balance of power position. They fear that under the new system the Christian Democrats would be enabled to control parliament without reference to them.

These parties' apprehensions about the electoral bill stem from their experience with five years of domination by the Christian Democratic Party, and from its increasing rightist and "clerical" tendencies. They point to the Christian Democrats' reiterated sponsorship of measures restricting the rights of labor and freedom of press and assembly, to the continued toleration of former Fascist officials in government

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positions, and to the growing influence on the party of Catholic Action leader Luigi Gedda, who has advocated collaboration between the Christian Democrats and the neo-Fascists. The weight of evidence supports these charges of increasing right-wing domination of the Christian Democratic party, and many Italians both inside and outside the party are disturbed by it.

Of the three small parties of the center bloc, the Social Democrats are the most disturbed by their alliance with the Christian Democrats. Many of them insist that their party has thus been made ineffectual as a workers' party and has been prevented from drawing defectors from the Nenni Socialists.

Meanwhile, leftist opposition groups are attempting to capitalize on these misgivings of the center bloc. The Nenni Socialists have announced that they will run a list separate from the Communists, a move evidently intended to coax votes away from the center bloc's Social Democratic Party. The announcement is probably designed also to undercut the reported demand of 50 leading members of Nenni's party for a renunciation of the unity of action pact with the Communists and is likely to appeal to nonparty voters wishing to voice opposition to the government's rightist tendencies without directly supporting the Communists.

The small Italian Workers' Movement headed by ex-Communists Cucchi and Magnani and acting independently of all the blocs, has likewise been persistently but unsuccessfully wooing the left wing of the Social Democrats. This splinter group has simultaneously been seeking defections from the Communists and Nenni Socialists, and seems more likely than the Social Democrats to profit from any dissatisfaction in that quarter.

In view of the fact that the Christian Democrats' share of the popular vote fell from 49 percent in 1948 to 36 percent in the 1951-52 local elections, such leftist tactics need have only a modest success to alienate enough of De Gasperi's support for the extremists of either left or right to obtain a balance of power position in the new parliament.